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Toward Peaceful Use of the Atom

An Intimate Message From Washington

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WASHINGTON

Is the United States or the U.S.S.R. going to lead the world into the land of atomic power plenty?

That is the nub of the hearing and debate now going on on Capitol Hill over the Gore bill—a bill that would direct the Atomic Energy Commission to build six power-reactors to demonstrate the practical value of atomic power for commercial and industrial purposes.

Strangely enough, it is a subject that is getting little public attention and less public interest—though it may well decide whether the United States or the U.S.S.R. becomes the mecca of the world in peaceful use of the atom.

What Senator Gore wants is some drastic, impressive, government action to reclaim American leadership in this vast and important field. He is convinced that you can't get it by relying on private industry or private investment. The government must step in and underwrite it—just as it did the Manhattan Project in the war. This is not a hot-war necessity, but a cold-war necessity; for either the United States does something like this or it appears likely to lose the race to the Soviets.

Senator Gore has a worthy supporter in AEC Commissioner Thomas Murray, who earlier this year publicly urged a "crash" program of government reactor construction. But he was outvoted by the other commission members including the chairman, Admiral Lewis Strauss—and his program died aborning. Now, however, the battle has been transferred from the executive to the legislative—and is out in the open, which gives Senator Gore at least some hope that he can get action on the matter.

While perhaps no one can say positively (though some do) that the U.S.S.R. is leading the United States in this field and moving ahead faster every day, there are accumulating reports to that effect. The United States, while it has five power-projects on paper, has only one in the works—and that only under construction: the 60,000 kilowatt reactor being built at Shippingport by the government.

There are four other reactors under consideration, involving industry participation, that can produce another 700,000 kilowatts of atomic power—but that is not only counting your chickens before they are hatched, but before the eggs are even laid.

By contrast the U.S.S.R. has an atomic

power plant already operating and has plans for producing 2,500,000 kilowatts by 1960. The British will begin delivering atomic power this year, and their blueprints call for development of an atomic power capacity of more than 2,000,000 kilowatts in the next decade. Yet all Washington can point to is a hoped-for 750,000 kilowatts by 1960.

What makes the situation confusing is that despite these facts, which no one at least denies, Chairman Strauss continues to insist that the United States is still leading the world in this field, and that America has a weakness for overrating the capabilities of the Russians. And he does this in face of conflicting testimony by Mr. Allen Dulles, Chief of Central Intelligence, that the Soviets are undoubtedly ahead of the United States in this field. At the same time he opposes the Gore proposal for government construction of six large-scale reactors even through private industry.

The Gore proposal is not premised on the belief that the United States needs this atomic power—a factor which plays a great part in Britain's drive to develop atomic power—but on two other postulates: that the cost of atomic power can only be reduced to competitive levels by government experimentation in reactor construction; that the nation which accomplishes this first is going to have all the underdeveloped and backward countries and areas of the world beating a path to its door.

Thus the question becomes for America not only can atomic power become economically available, but is it not a political necessity? Can the United States afford to let the U.S.S.R. dominate this field?

There are plenty of reasons why now is not the time for the government to start a crash atomic power program: Private industry should do it; it is totally uneconomic; there is a skilled manpower shortage; the AEC is too busy now to take on new assignments. But they do not reach to the heart of the issue—which is rather whether the United States should deliberately and publicly allow the U.S.S.R. to forge ahead in this field that is so big with hope the world over.

The psychological defeat the United States would suffer from a clear Soviet lead could be disastrous. So the question becomes not whether the country can afford a crash program, or needs a crash program as a power source, but whether it can afford to not have one—for global rather than national reasons.